

Section 11 – Turning the Tide

The Patriarchy Strikes Back

Patriarchal retaliation against the many forms of protest challenging its assumed authority began quickly. In 1970, four students were shot and killed by National Guardsmen during a protest at Kent State University in Ohio. Nine others were injured. While the confused circumstances of the actual shootings were disputed, the consequences are not. This was the moment the Vietnam War ‘came home’ to America, and Robert Haldeman later wrote that it led directly to the Watergate scandal and the overthrow and disgrace of Richard Nixon.

Again, in 1972, British soldiers opened fire on a crowd of Civil Rights protestors in the Bogside area of Derry (Londonderry) in Northern Ireland. Twenty-six unarmed protestors were shot by paratroops and thirteen died either on the spot or soon after. Far from calming the situation, the shootings caused it to explode, as many in the province threw their support behind the Provisional IRA and the campaign of bombing it launched. In 2010, the Prime Minister of the UK was forced to apologise for the killings.¹

The Lithuanian-American archaeologist Marija Gimbutas (1921- 1993) had become Professor of European Archaeology and Indo-European Studies at UCLA in 1963. From the early stages of her career, Gimbutas had identified Goddess-culture in early European Societies, especially through the publication, in 1963, of her book *The Balts*. This was followed by several other titles expanding the theme, notably *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* (1974), *The Language of the Goddess* (1989) and *The Civilisation of the Goddess* (1991).

Contrary to some sources, Gimbutas had no involvement in the nascent women’s spirituality movement during the 1970s. Then, in 1982, *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe* was republished. In it, Gimbutas had concluded, from the evidence she discovered through many years of research, that Old Europe was a matrilineal society worshipping a female deity. She said in an interview in 1990:²

¹ After a twelve-year investigation, Lord Savile’s report concluded in 2010 that the shootings were ‘unjustified and unjustifiable’.

² As a result of criticism by other academics, Gimbutas stopped using the term ‘matriarchal.’ However it is clear from this quote that she is referring to a matriarchy.

‘Motherhood determined the social structure and religion because religion always reflects social structure. Old Europe was a matrilineal society where the queen was on the top and her brother next to her.’³

While others have misinterpreted the Mother Goddess as an icon only of love and nurture, Gimbutas knew that she was far more complex than this:

‘She was not only the Mother Goddess who commands fertility, or the Lady of the Beasts who governs the fecundity of animals and all wild nature, or the frightening Mother Terrible, but a composite image with traits accumulated from both the pre-agricultural and agricultural eras. During the latter she became essentially a Goddess of Regeneration, i.e., a Moon Goddess, a product of a sedentary, matrilineal community, encompassing the archetypal unity and multiplicity of feminine nature. She was (the) giver of life...she promotes fertility, and at the same time she was the wielder of the destructive powers of nature. The feminine nature, like the moon is light as well as dark.’⁴

Until and throughout the 1960s, it was widely held in academia that Mother Goddess worship had once been widespread and that the matriarchy had most likely been a viable system of social organisation. Marija Gimbutas believed the evidence supported this, as did James Mellaart. They were accompanied by supporting voices from many other disciplines, including mythologists like Joseph Campbell and Robert Graves. However, in the 1980s a backlash took place. In essence, this was a patriarchal reaction to the idea that a matriarchy had ever existed, and its aim was to discredit the academic supporters of the idea. James Mellaart found his work being attacked by his student Ian Hodder, but the most virulent assault was against Gimbutas, led by her former colleague and friend Colin Renfrew.

The criticism against Gimbutas surrounded her interpretation of evidence. Gimbutas was an archaeologist but also a folklorist and a student of mythology. She had used the interpretative skills that her background gave her to look at the physical evidence and assess from it the type of culture that might have been its creator. It is true that interpretations of this kind must always to some extent remain subjective but the consequence of this can be reduced where the interpreter is thoroughly informed in other aspects of the culture, which Gimbutas certainly was.

Gimbutas, whose work had been globally celebrated, was attacked because she had used her interpretative skills to posit that, alongside the welter of other evidence, the many thousands of Goddess figurines that had been discovered in Europe, dating from as early as 35,000 BCE,

³ Gimbutas, M. *Interview with Kell Kearns. The Marija Gimbutas Collection (Box 101)* (Audio) Santa Barbara. OPUS Archives and Research Centre 1990. Quoted at <http://WNW.springerreference.com/docs1edit/chapterdbid/310423.html>

⁴ Gimbutas 2007.

suggested that a non-patriarchal society had been in place, which Gimbutas called matristic and matrilineal. A concerted effort was made to destroy Gimbutas' reputation in a feeding-frenzy of academic self-interest, which largely ignored her thorough and balanced assessment of the evidence.

The purpose of this was clear: the patriarchy would not tolerate any challenge. Women, as ever, must be brought under patriarchal control. Dale Spender says:

‘These techniques [of control] work by initially discrediting a woman and helping to remove her from the mainstream; they work by becoming the basis for any future discussion about her; and they work by keeping future generations of women away from her.’⁵

Despite the flaws in the arguments against her and the clear difficulties some of her critics had with basic concepts of mythology and religion, Gimbutas' reputation was severely damaged by the attacks, which began when she was dying of cancer and reached fever-pitch after her death. Gimbutas herself said that she thought it would take thirty-five years before her ideas were once again accepted. Unfortunately, she died in 1993 and did not see the rise of a new generation of feminist academics and scientists or the success they have had.

Partly as a result of Gimbutas' work and her call for a broader approach which involved disciplines other than archaeology, a new discipline has appeared, called Archaeomythology. It is based on the holistic, inter-disciplinary approach taken by Gimbutas, Mellaart and Campbell, and which is normal in the natural sciences.⁶ While still young, this new discipline is already challenging the orthodoxies promoted by Renfrew, Hodder *et al.*

Today, courses in Goddess culture are available in Western universities and senior academics like Bethany Hughes and Francesca Stavrakopoulou have written bestselling books and made television programmes in which they discuss the Goddess and the influence of Goddess culture. Despite the most strenuous efforts of the patriarchy, the pendulum appears to be swinging back.

⁵ Spender, Dale. *Women of Ideas and What Men Have Done to Them*. Routledge. 1982. Cited by Spretnak, C. *Anatomy of a Backlash: Concerning the Work of Marija Gimbutas*. The Journal of Archaeomythology, Special Issue. 2011.

⁶ The holistic approach is not by any means new. It was the method of Darwin, was well expressed by William Emerson Ritter, and remains the basis of the natural sciences. The exclusivist views taken by some academics are a function of modern disciplinary restrictions and of the academy itself. These latter all contain the inherent flaw that their very narrowness may lead to the exclusion, sometimes deliberately, of contradictory evidence; Hodder's inability to correctly identify a matriarchy, from evidence that conclusively indicates the presence of one, is an example.